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Researching Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliaments

In June 2009, John Bercow presided over the British House of Commons in his first session as Speaker. For the British press, there was not a great deal to be said about the performance of his duties aside from his decision to wear a business suit, tie and plain black academic gown. In doing so, Bercow eschewed the 'traditional' court dress of his predecessors, not wearing tights or a wig. In fact, his immediate predecessor, Michael Martin, had not worn tights either, and Betty Boothroyd abandoned the wig in 1992. So it was Bernard "Jack" Weatherill, Speaker between 1983 and 1992, who last wore full court dress. The Times turned to the family tailoring business, Bernard Weatherill of Savile Row, for a reaction to Bercow's sartorial decision in 2009. The managing director commented that, 'were "Jack" Weatherill still alive, he would say that it is at your peril if you underestimate the dress of office'. He suggested that Bercow should have continued to uphold the 'better traditions of parliament'. What might such seemingly trivial debates over dress tell us about the serious business of parliamentary democracy? What constructions of gender, class or race might be encoded in such performances? What does wig-wearing do to the wearer or mean to his or her audience? The Leverhulme Trust-funded research programme, Gendered Ceremony and Ritual in Parliaments (GCRP), aims to answer such questions and highlight the seriousness of the symbolic in politics. The programme examines how struggles over the meanings and performance of ceremony and ritual in parliaments secure and reproduce as well as challenge and transform powerful institutional norms.

The work of the GCRP programme is about much more than just wigs, however. It examines the everyday ritualized and ceremonial practices of parliamentary politics, such as the conventions and performance of parliamentary debate as well as spectacular moments such as the opening ceremony. The programme forges a new direction in feminist understandings of politics. It complements the work of new feminist institutionalists, and integrates the insights of gender theory on performativity and intersectionality with political theory arguments over deliberative democracy, representation and authority. The research of the programme provides a fresh take on deconstructing the masculinity of parliamentary institutions in three very different but interconnected contexts: Westminster, India and South Africa. As such, it maps the transnational flow and local innovations of parliamentary practices forged through Empire and appropriated by postcolonial nations. It opens up exciting new dialogues across disciplines and between gender theory and mainstream scholarship on politics.

The GCRP programme commenced in October 2007, and closes at the end of 2011. The following discussion took place on 18 November 2010, at a programme workshop called Disruptive Democracy: Analysing Protest in Contemporary Legislatures. It included four of the GCRP researchers, who conducted a structured conversation about their research agendas, experiences in the field as feminist researchers, and the contributions they hope to make to feminist and gender theory scholarship. Carole Spary, University of Warwick, is a post-doctoral fellow studying the Indian parliament; Rachel Johnson, University of Sheffield, is a post-doctoral fellow studying the South African parliament; Faith Armitage, Birkbeck College, a post-

doctoral fellow, and Rosa Malley, University of Bristol, a PhD student, are both studying the British parliament.

WHY CEREMONY AND RITUAL?

Rosa Malley: For the research I'm doing for my PhD, which examines the substantive representation of women and institutionalisation of gendered norms, I've mainly steered away from the more spectacular political ceremonies and focused instead on what can be called 'ritualized' behaviour – the everyday enactment of institutional norms – and the processes of socialisation behind this. For my project, ceremony and ritual are best used to enhance a feminist institutionalist framework rather than to replace it, insofar as they don't provide a coherent framework because the insights about ceremony and ritual are drawn from diverse disciplines, mainly anthropology, sociology and religious studies.

Faith Armitage: I agree that a good way to think of what we're doing is enhancing an institutionalist framework by drawing attention specifically to ceremony and ritual and the symbolic aspects of power. The research I'm doing on the Speaker of the House of Commons bears this out insofar as it is both a highly ceremonial office as well as having many practical functions to do with the House as a legislative and representative body. It's surprising that political scientists haven't paid attention to ceremony and ritual, because they are so clearly bound up with the power dynamics of parliament. Last year's special issue of *The Journal of Legislative Studies* about parliamentary ceremony and ritualⁱ that emerged out of the programme is probably the best recent argument for political scientists and political theorists to take these concepts and approaches seriously since all of the contributors were able to show their significance to a wide variety of institutional settings and issues such as representation, leadership and socialisation. Perhaps a bit differently from Rosa, I'm also treating ceremony and ritual as objects of study in their own right. I've done some work on the Speaker's election and daily procession, both of which are highly ritualised political events. And Rachel is leading on the strand of research we'll produce that looks at the significance of the opening ceremonies of parliaments.

Rachel Johnson: I suppose, especially in the work on the openings of parliaments, I am also primarily thinking of ceremony and ritual as research objects in their own right. I always have in mind those lines from the conclusion of Clifford Geertz's famous book *Negara*, 'The dramas of the theatre state, mimetic of themselves, were, in the end, neither illusions nor lies, neither sleight of hand nor make-believe. They were what there was.'ⁱⁱ The opening ceremonies are quite often grand events, seemingly disconnected from what might be seen as the proper business of modern legislatures, but they are very much a part of the life of the institution, performed annually. What a focus on ceremony and ritual can do is facilitate looking at aspects of the institution that would otherwise often remain in the background. The point about a 'background,' though, it's still there, it's part of the picture. So we find ourselves looking at what is 'everyday' and what is 'normal' or perceived to be normal, often through moments when norms are broken. Ceremony and ritual seem to me to be one of the primary ways an institution creates a sense of itself – and moments of continuity and change are very often bound up with discussions over these ceremonies.

Carole Spary: Institutional approaches talk about formal and informal rules. I think that ritual and ceremony bring a focus on performance and performativity. It is one thing to know that a rule or norm exists because it is codified on paper in the rules of procedure or because people talk about it as part of parliamentary practice. It is another thing to understand how that rule or norm plays out in practice: if and how it is performed and reproduced, or if it is contested and interrupted, and whether this contestation leads to long term institutional norm change or whether it is just a momentary rupture. Norms are either being performed or they're being contested, either through an alternative performance or through the absence of a performance. That's interesting because there seem to be multiple scripts operating at any given time, different rules and norms all competing for power within the same institutional space. So I agree that taking an anthropological and ethnographic approach allows you to look at 'the everyday,' to understand how parliamentary life and culture is experienced and reproduced by its participants – the MPs and the staff – and, to some extent, received and scrutinised by its audience – voters and the media. My own research on the Indian parliament has been informed in this respect by Judith Butler's work on performativityⁱⁱⁱ, as well as by analyses about the hyper-visibility of racialised and gendered bodies in legislative spaces developed by Mary Hawkesworth on the US Congress^{iv} and Nirmal Puwar on the UK parliament.^v

RM: I'm interested in the overlapping concerns of the gendered ceremony and ritual project with the feminist institutionalist theory-building project being developed by Fiona Mackay, Mona Lena Krook, Louise Chappell, Georgina Waylen and others.^{vi} There is a shared concern in feminist approaches to institutions and the literature on ceremony and ritual in a focus on gender, power and institutional norms. Both approaches are characterised by their interest in institutional power structures and the potential of these to privilege some interests above others. They share a concern with institutional continuity and how stability is maintained over time. And both approaches are interested in the formal, informal and cognitive aspects of institutions and how these contribute to behaviour, perceptions and identity. How do you think our concern with ceremony and ritual can add to or complement feminist approaches to institutions?

FA: I think it forces us not to presuppose that sex or gender differences are the most important cleavages in a political institution. Obviously, they *are* important, but what I've found in Westminster for example, is that *party*, not sex, is the greatest predictor of attitudes toward ceremony and ritual. These are generalisations of course but in my experience, Conservative MPs – men and women – tend to support the traditional ceremonies, whereas Labour and Liberal Democrat MPs, again, of both genders, tend to be reformers or modernisers: they worry about the traditional ceremonies alienating the public or getting in the way of doing politics. I learned that if you ask MPs about whether or not particular ceremonies or rituals might serve to include some and exclude others, they will point to many things besides gender, such as class, race and religious identities. So you could say that the research's respondents fairly quickly made it a project about intersectionality and multiple exclusions.

RJ: I think ceremony and ritual lead you straight into looking at certain types of masculinity which is the crux of the matter if you're going to look at gendered institutions such as parliaments. It's interesting to look at how women may have been marginalised by certain traditions or practices, but you also really need to get grip on

what kind of masculinities are being produced and constructed in and through the institution. Ceremony and ritual takes you right into the heart of that – rather than looking at the edges where people have been excluded – it takes you right into the heart of the relationship between the institution and masculinity and therefore what we mean when we say this institution is gendered. The work of Raewyn Connell^{vii} is important to me in thinking about this because of the way she talks about the need for us to understand a particular institutional masculinity in the context of wider society and in terms of its own historical development. Looking at ceremony and ritual forces you to examine the historical depth of performativity in a particular context, something Connell argues we should do.

FA: That's a great point. In part because we're all feminists, there might be an expectation that we'll focus on the women in 'our' parliaments. But men predominate and there's a considerable gap in the masculinities literature about political institutions as places where different types of masculinity are privileged and disparaged.

CS: Cultural contexts will have an impact for thinking about masculinity in parliament in the three different cases. Intersectionality is critically important – particularly in India as gender intersects with caste, class, religion and region. The diversity among MPs in the Indian parliament makes it difficult to identify a single, dominant, institutionally-embedded form of masculinity operating in the parliament. Interestingly, you would think religion would be important in India and it is, but it is not as salient as caste. Religion is very salient in Indian politics, but is under-explored as a dynamic of inclusion/exclusion within the parliament, although studies have shown that Muslims MPs are a relatively marginalised group in the parliament. The salience of caste in parliament is partly due to the political mobilisation of caste in Indian politics and the rise of lower castes as part of a process often referred to as the vernacularisation of Indian democracy. This is reflected institutionally through a number of political parties which represent lower caste communities. And the caste-class-gender intersection in the parliament manifests itself in interesting ways. A number of women ministers are from a Dalit background and the first woman Speaker of the Indian parliament elected in 2009 is from the Dalit community, although she can also be considered a member of the political aristocracy due to her father's contribution to the Independence movement.

OBSERVING AND LISTENING: UNDERSTANDING RITUAL

RM: One thing I think we've all grappled with is operationalising the concepts of ceremony and ritual. We're agreed that they invite us to consider the everyday processes by which elected representatives are *socialised* in the institution. But getting at exactly how this happens is difficult methodologically – for example, getting MPs first to perceive that participating in a ritualised procedure at Westminster *constitutes* their socialisation, and then to discuss it with you, is very difficult, and this might be because their participation in what we think of as rituals is unconscious.

RJ: I have found, having just come back from a month of field work in Cape Town, that some of the most useful things I did were sitting in the public gallery for hours just watching proceedings, and as far as possible, hanging around the buildings.

Talking to people gives you some insight, but it only gives you *their* version of what they think is normal. You've then got to watch it to get a grip on that yourself.

FA: Yes, you can't come at the concepts of ceremony and ritual too directly with British MPs. What I've found is you get them talking about what, substantively, they are doing – like, what campaigns or bills they are working on – and usually the conversation comes round to ways in which parliament's procedures and norms impede or enable their work, such as the helpfulness of officials in formulating questions and motions correctly. These stories are aspects of the culture of parliament and it directly affects their ability to be a representative. So you *do* end up talking about ritual processes, but most would not introduce those terms spontaneously.

RJ: How much those concepts resonate depends on who you are talking to. If you interview, for example, the Serjeant-at-Arms, he or she would almost certainly be happy to talk about how important ceremony was. But for other people, that's not really the work of parliament, that's not really a substantive thing to be discussing. In South Africa where there are such stark socio-economic, material issues, it has at times been seen as a frivolous topic. So, you have to ask carefully worded questions. Being up-front and using the word 'ceremony' and, especially in South Africa, using the word 'ritual' has been a little bit problematic. There are strong associations of ritual with traditional authorities, or chiefs and traditional religions. There is a history of separate forms of government for different racial groups under Apartheid to contend with. Also, there is a history of the study of African peoples through anthropology as the bearers of tradition through ritual practices as opposed to a 'modern' West. This context means 'ritual' is not a word readily associated with parliamentary government.

CS: I remember interviewing a former MP and he said, 'oh well we don't really have any ceremonies or anything like that.' But then if I asked about particular events, such as the election of the Speaker or the opening ceremony, MPs talked about them in more detail but didn't always agree on the significance of these events in terms of the everyday practice of Parliament. I also found it more useful to use terms such as 'conventions' instead of rituals, but even then interviewees often talked more about what should happen and less about what does happen, until I brought up specific examples.

PERFORMATIVITY, DISRUPTION AND DEMOCRACY

FA: Carole, you've led us to really interesting results through leading on the strand of research dealing with disruption and disorder in parliaments. It turns out that the concept of ritual is really vital to understanding disruption in Westminster, and its relationship to democratic accountability. Tony Wright, an academic and now former Labour MP, has argued that the Commons' chamber during Prime Minister's Question Time is habitually rowdy because MPs are literally attempting to *perform* holding government to account.^{viii} But parliament's ability *genuinely* to hold government to account is constantly in doubt given the executive dominance of parliament and strong party discipline. Backbench and opposition MPs can console themselves with this theatrical, ritualistic and sometimes disruptive performance of demanding accountability – Wright uses the term 'synthetic anger' to describe some of the performances you see. If we accept these arguments, the implication is that the

sorts of things that textbooks tell you are processes of accountability are actually the last places you will find genuine democratic accountability.

CS: Iris Marion Young's work^{ix} on the potentially exclusionary norms of deliberation has been invaluable to me for thinking about disruptions to parliamentary debates in India. There is clearly a spectrum of opinion amongst MPs on whether they should be allowed to disrupt proceedings in order to get their point across. There is also a sense that some MPs more than others are better positioned to disrupt debates, and this sense is informed by a complex array of identities including caste, gender and party hierarchy. Young argues that three norms of deliberation – articulateness, orderliness, and dispassionateness – are culturally specific and represent a particular speech culture which can be exclusionary at least on grounds of class and gender. As you say, Faith, there are definitely issues of accountability involved. If MPs are protesting all through the question hour then people do not get to hold the government to account by asking questions, so it is as if the disruptors are undermining those accountability mechanisms. Whether or not those questions are effective in holding government to account is another issue, but the fact that they see disruption as a higher priority is interesting in itself. Again, this is where I think the performance aspect is really important, particularly in relation to the party dynamics and whether deliberation takes place in public view or in negotiations behind closed doors, or as Shirin Rai has referred to in the context of our research as 'front-stage' and 'back-stage'. These dynamics of performance certainly muddy the waters of what MPs bring to debates and what they are prepared to negotiate in order to reach a good outcome.

FA: Just to shift the conversation a bit, I'm interested to hear if the concept of the public/private divide, which provides a backbone for a lot of feminist political theory, has cropped up for anyone. It's always been on the agenda at Westminster in the sense of there being questions about how public MPs' private lives are or should be. Sex 'scandals' involving MPs and ministers are the main way, historically, that public and private lives become entangled. It has become newly important at Westminster because of the MPs' expenses scandal and its aftermath, which concerns how MPs will be paid and the allowance system they'll have to cover costs. There is a lot of concern amongst MPs with families, whether you can be an MP *and* have a family. Some people, in their anger, have recommended that MPs ought to be housed in a dormitory, a single room. MPs with families have pointed out how impossible this would make having a normal family life. So it's opening up a really interesting debate about understandings of public and private and what these public representatives are meant to be doing, whether we should expect them to resemble 'ordinary' people, and how they are meant to negotiate their private lives alongside their public responsibilities.

RM: Unfortunately, though, it seems the reforms aren't going to make it any easier for people with families to be representatives – that point has been raised repeatedly during my interviews with MPs from all parties.

CS: I was trying to gather together some examples of protest across different legislatures around the world, and I found one example that was about a female Member of the European Parliament who took her baby into the plenary chamber in

Strasbourg because there wasn't anywhere for her to breastfeed her baby, and she was protesting about that.

FA: Breastfeeding is still forbidden in the House of Commons, though there is now an on-site crèche at Westminster. I wonder if there are any pregnant MPs at Westminster who would be willing to raise the breastfeeding issue again?

CS: I think these criticisms about the lack of childcare and prohibition of breastfeeding might be quite context-specific. In India, the lack of childcare facilities in parliament has not been highlighted as making it difficult for women – and men – to combine work and domestic responsibilities. The issue is inflected by class as well as a culture that generates a broader understanding of family, so you wouldn't necessarily confront these issues in the same way, as families may hire domestic workers or family members may accompany MPs during their stay in Delhi for the parliamentary session. I met a first-time elected woman MP who had a young child, and her husband, also a politician, accompanied her while she was in Delhi for the parliamentary session, and they returned home for the weekend. Many women MPs already have a grown up family so perhaps this is more a question of whether women with young families would consider running for election and whether they would be selected by political parties to contest an election. I haven't heard the same debate about working hours, or having a crèche in parliament. Officially, parliament sits daily from 11am to 6pm, but debates often go on until 7pm, 8pm, and in the past with debates on high profile legislation or motions of confidence they have gone through the night. Senior MPs often have a Delhi bungalow with an office where they receive visitors including constituents and researchers like me. There are social areas in parliament, such as Central Hall where MPs meet to have lunch or tea, and there are rooms designated for parties to meet together, but MPs rarely socialise within the parliament. The sense I get from being there is that there is nothing akin to the Westminster 'club'.

RM: So it's more compatible with family life in that way?

CS: Well, it is and it isn't because MPs have to travel from much further away. India is comparable to the size of Europe. It's a three-hour flight from south India to Delhi and many MPs go to their constituencies on the weekends during parliamentary sessions. And parliament runs for around seven months a year. Ultimately, the gendered work-life balance norms need to be analysed differently to Westminster.

RJ: Those gendered norms are also subject to change. It is clear that in all three parliaments, organisational timetables and the social rituals that can surround particular moments in the parliamentary day or year can be very difficult to alter. In South Africa, 1994 and the first democratic parliament was a major moment of rupture, but even then there was a sense that it was difficult to change the old ways. Hannah Britton has documented this in her study^x of the democratic transition in the South African parliament. Parliamentary working hours were made more family friendly, but black women MPs elected for the first time in 1994 complained that they needed 'a wife' in order to function properly. Those kinds of comments had overlapping racial and class dynamics – some white women MPs didn't identify the same problems as their black colleagues because within white South African society the employment of domestic workers is very widespread. The configurations and

contests around public/private lives are definitely useful for helping us get to grips with differences and similarities in our three institutions. For thinking about the successes and failures of initiatives to 'modernise' parliaments, I have found some of the work from studies of organizations useful, such as Sara Ahmed's work^{xi} on diversity discourses in universities. Her ideas on the 'non-performativity' of certain speech acts and what processes are at work when an institution lays claim to 'diversity and equality' have been useful for my thinking about what is happening in the South African parliament as a result of its claims to promote gender equality.

MOVING FEMINIST RESEARCH ON LEGISLATURES FORWARD

FA: The programme is coming to an official end in 2011, so perhaps we can reflect a little bit about in what ways we think this programme 'has legs' – what are the questions we still want to pursue that critically engage with what other feminist researchers are doing? The representation of women – especially, their on-going under-representation – continues to be a major preoccupation within the broad gender-and-politics field. Although I don't think our work has cracked the nut of why women are under-represented in most democratic legislatures, I do think it sheds new light on these questions because of the level of detail it provides on neglected, arcane and confusing parliamentary procedures, which in turn affect the experiences of individual legislators. On a theoretical level, Judith Squires's concept of the constitutive representation of gender^{xii} or CRG, seems to me the most useful way forward for research on Westminster, and probably other institutions too. CRG doesn't presuppose that all female MPs will act *this* way, and all male MPs will act *that* way, and that's a useful outlook in institutions where party identity often seems to trump gender identity in terms of behaviour and opinion. On a more practical level, I hope our research is of use to academics and practitioners who are working to reform legislatures, through such initiatives as the Gender Sensitive Parliaments programme of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. The appetite for reform at Westminster seems to have remained high, even two years on from the expenses scandal, and I think the themes we have been pursuing provide at least some ammunition for parliamentary reformers.

RM: I agree that parliamentary reform remains high on the agenda at Westminster and think this lens has provided an extremely useful way to tap into these debates by addressing fundamental issues, also of concern to feminists studying political institutions, of institutional power, continuity and change. Although these concepts deal with issues commonly dismissed in political science as 'ceremonial sideshow',^{xiii} focussing on the symbolic and cultural aspects of political institutions captures subtle, and difficult to measure, aspects of the institutional culture that look to influence a representative's everyday and mundane experiences of the institution. It therefore provides a focus on the political and gendered context of the institution and insight into how this influences what representatives think is normal and possible; crucial for understanding the 'claims-making, frames and contests which construct the meaning and content' of the substantive representation of women.^{xiv}

CS: The comparative work on the programme has been very beneficial, and has really highlighted just how institutionally specific parliamentary performances are, despite some apparent commonalities, and understanding this through historical analysis is very important. The next step should be to pay more attention to aspects of identity

such as class, caste and gender and how these inform disruptive (and non-disruptive) performances. One particular challenge will be to analyse parliamentary performances in India through the lens of masculinity studies, which, in the context of other legislatures has so far been very limited. Processes of norm stabilisation are as important as norm change, and so one needs to ask if disruptions challenge potentially exclusionary norms of deliberation, but also whether disruption, as a nascent ritualised performance of deliberation, is producing new forms of exclusion. The phenomenon of disruptions in parliamentary debates in India presents a fruitful empirical context for exploring more theoretically how deliberation and representation are performed. Comparatively, it might work to situate this form of legislative performance on a spectrum with other types of disruptive performance, such as filibustering in the US, which is already the subject of considerable study. And disruption aside, I will be watching closely to see whether, and if so when, the women's quota bill, so far passed in the upper house in March 2010, will be introduced and passed in the lower house, and to analyse its subsequent impact on the participation of women in parliament and the performance of debates in the chambers.

RJ: I think the GCRP programme has been great for getting us to think about national parliaments as privileged spaces in which ideas about gender and nation are constituted and contested. The project's comparative focus on the three parliaments in the UK, India and South Africa has, I think, uncovered an interesting, unexplored, dynamic about the changing relationship between the three institutions. There is the colonial and post-colonial history of the relationship between the parliaments in Westminster, Delhi and Cape Town that I think really should form part of our understanding of these parliaments as political institutions. There is a social history to be told about the mainly male, elite officials who have communicated with each other over the years, as well as some fascinating symbolic exchanges. I think a great deal of insight can be gleaned from examining more closely the shifting positions of the three parliaments in their respective governmental systems, nations and their relationships with each other. This really ties in with moves within feminist theory to understanding the global dynamics of gender, power and politics.

ⁱ *The Journal of Legislative Studies* (2010) 16(3).

ⁱⁱ Geertz, Clifford (1980) *Negara: The Theatre-State in Nineteenth Century Bali*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

ⁱⁱⁱ Butler, Judith (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London: Routledge; Butler, Judith (1997) *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, London: Routledge.

^{iv} Hawkesworth, Mary (2003) 'Congressional Enactments of Race-Gender: Toward a Theory of Raced-Gendered Institutions', *American Political Science Review* 97(4), pp. 529-550.

^v Puwar, Nirmal (2004) *Space Invaders: Race, Gender and Bodies Out of Place*, Oxford: Berg.

^{vi} See <http://www.femfiin.com/>

^{vii} Connell, Raewyn (2008) 'A Thousand Miles From Kind: Men, Masculinities and Modern Institutions', *Journal of Men's Studies: A Scholarly Journal about Men and Masculinities*, 16(3), pp. 237-252.

^{viii} Wright, Tony (2003) *British Politics: A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

^{ix} Young, Iris Marion (2002) *Inclusion and Democracy*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

^x Britton, Hannah (2005) *Women in the South African Parliament: From Resistance to Governance*, Chicago: University of Illinois Press.

^{xi} Ahmed, Sara (2006) 'The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism', *Meridians: Journal of Women, Race and Culture*, 7(1), pp. 104-126.

^{xii} Squires, Judith (2008) 'The Constitutive Representation of Gender: Extra-Parliamentary Re-Presentations of Gender Relations', *Representation*, 44 (2), pp. 187-204.

^{xiii} Crewe, E. (2005) *Lords of Parliament: Manners, Rituals and Politics*. Manchester University Press: Manchester.

^{xiv} Mackay, F. (2008) 'Thick' Conceptions of Substantive Representation: Women, Gender and Political Institutions', *Representation*, Vol. 44, no. 2, p 132.